AMAZING GRACE
Romans 5:6-11
June 15, 1975

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Text: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."

It has taken me a long time to learn that my mind, my ability to reason and analyze and deduce and conclude is not, by any stretch of the imagination, the sole and universal arbiter of truth. It has taken me a long time to learn that God does not depend for his existence on my having weighed all the evidence and given him permission to exist. It has taken me a long time to learn to trust my heart as well as my intellect.

The story is told of Captain Eleazar Hull, one of the most famous 19th century skippers in the New England whaling fleet. Hull was the best: his ships sailed further with less difficulty and brought home more oil than any others. He had no formal, academic training in the science of navigation. When asked how he managed to guide his ships over the immense expanse of the seven seas he would reply, "Well, I go up on the deck, listen to the wind in the riggin', get the drift of the sea, and take a long look at the stars. Then I set my course."

But then the Insurance Companies intervened. They could no longer extend coverage to vessels the captain of which had no formal knowledge of the science of navigation. With great fear and trepidation three company executives approached Captail Hull to inform him that he must either go to -ation school or retire. To their delight and puzzlement the old seaman iastic about the prospect of learning some science. And so he chool, graduated and returned to the sea.

nen he returned to Port after a voyage of two years, his friends ery anxious to know how it had been to sail "by the book."

"It was wonderful", Captain Hull responded. "Whenever I wanted to know my position, I'd go to my cabin, get out all the charts, work through the proper equations, and set a course with mathematical precision.. Then I'd go up on the deck, get the drift of the sea, listen to the wind in the riggin', and take a long look at the stars." (See William Muchl, All the Dammed Angels p 16) Then I'd correct my computations for error.

A charming story, I think: a delightful corrective to our obsession with science. And yet we know better, don't we? Captain Hull, may have depended on his common sense emotional and ~~intellectual~~ responses in navigating a 19th Century sailing vessel; but the Appolo project literally couldn't have gotten off the ground apart from disciplined, pure and non-emotional technology. The result may have been lacking in art and poetry but it was certainly successful.

We are, you and I , children on the Enlightenment. In a nostalgic sense we like the Captain Hull's of the world. But for our surgeon or Airline pilot, we'll chose the unemotional technician. hands-down More to the point, however, we have been seduced into accepting the thesis that the scientific method really does define any truth that's worth defining. We have been schooled to trust our minds, or at least someone's mind, and to distrust our emotions, our heart, our visceral responses. Madison Avenue knows it. A product will be immensely more appealing if its marketer can claim laboratory evidence of its superiority. "Laboratory tests show" is the new sacred litany, and the technician, replete with white coat and clipboard, is the new high priest.

The trouble is, life doesn't always come at us in ways that fit conveniently into neat categories. Life doesn't come at our minds only and we experience a lot of anxiety trying desperately to be rational about events that

defy rationality. I found the Freedom Train, for instance, to be a very frustrating experience. As you know if you visited it, a conveyer belt moved the viewer through a series of railroad cars, each containing a collage of Americana. The viewer was literally ~~assaulted~~ assaulted by immages, pictures, art, artifacts, documents, baseball bats, Lincoln's top hat, Kennedy's rocker: all the while listening intently to a collage of sound: fife and drums, the roar of cannon, the cheer of the crowd, the Battle Hymn of the Republic, "I have a dream" "Ask not what your country can do for you" "This day, December, 7 1941". My heart, my emotions kept responding to all of that; but my mind, my intellect, kept wanting to stop the conveyor and read the captions. At the end of each car I wanted to stop and digest it: but on we were pulled into one more emotional assault.

~~That, I would suggest, is a paradigm of life.~~ Things don't always fit into place; time doesn't always allow careful analysis. And if we walk through life, dependent only on our minds, our powers of logic, we will miss a lot - the beauty of religion, for instance: the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be precise.

The Gospel addresses itself to the whole man, not just the intellect. You do not have to be a college graduate to hear it. You do not have to be a scholar to respond to it. In fact, there is something intrinsic to the Gospel that is stripped away when our approach is totally academic. That is why we have such a monumental amount of difficulty with St. Paul.

Our text this morning, ~~I would~~ submit, is the theological equivalent of a quick trip through the Freedom Train." Christ died for the ungodly... God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us..justified by his blood..saved by him..we rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation." Slow down, Paul! Let us think about that for a minute! What do you mean

"ungodly"? Saved from what? What is justification anyway? We are offended by that assault on our intellect: we demand time to discuss, and weigh evidence and see if it fits into our view of the world.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not essentially intellectual. I say that with great care because under the guise of the Gospel people have become anti-intellectual. For too long and for too many people today, Christianity implies the shutting down of our reason. The Gospel has been used to defend ignorance: the faith, in the hands of a William Jennings Bryan for instance, has been used to oppose science and academic inquiry. Christians must bear the responsibility for the shameful truth that the Gospel has not held its own in the classroom and the halls of the academy. I am not suggesting that the Gospel is for the dull: on the contrary the Gospel inspires and forces us to think and probe and reason. What I am saying is that it addresses the whole man: mind and emotion: that it is both art and science. And that just as the art of Vincent Van Gough will not bear up under entirely logical scrutiny, but it is great art nonetheless, so the Gospel must be felt as well as - or perhaps more than - understood. Van Gough's trees, after all, don't really look like trees. But who would suggest that he has not captured something of the reality and truth of a tree?

"old time religion" has meant too often closed minded refusal to acknowledge new truths about the world - and sometimes it has meant the zealous opposition of academic freedom

So, St. Paul, is trying, in the letter to the Romans, to describe that which is not explainable by logic alone: trying to write reasonably about that which is essentially unreasonable - the death of Jesus Christ for undeserving men. The name we have given to it is "grace" - the unlikely, wildly irrational proposition that Almighty God, creator of all that is, loves us, and has saved us eternally through the death of his son on the cross.

One of the most refreshing things that has happened in our culture in years, in my estimation, has been the appearance of substantial theological themes within an area not at all associated with logic and reason: namely pop

music. The most fascinating of all was the appearance at the top of the charts of "Amazing Grace", an old revival hymn. It isn't very sophisticated: it will not stand up under much careful scrutiny: it isn't even in our hymn

"Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found

Was blind but now I see."

I'm not sure how to account for the popularity of that: except that it deals with the basic thrust of the Gospel, unadorned, unsophisticated, straightforward. I'm not sure it's important to account for it, except as it might teach us that people may have become tired hearing about the death of God and the secular city and found themselves responding, not very rationally, to the ideas of divine love and eternal salvation. In any event "Amazing Grace" is not unlike our text this morning: and the doctrine of Grace is, after all, the keynote of Christian Faith, Christian life, Christian Hope.

What do we mean by grace? What is the reality we are trying to express in the phrase "saved by grace"? If what I have been saying has merit, then grace must be experienced as well as understood. So let me, again, use a story rather than an explanation.

A young girl survived an automobile accident that claimed the lives of her parents. She was whisked away from the mourning community, the funeral and burial. She did not understand what had happened, but in the home of friends she began to suffer greatly from the separation and the loss of love and affection. She became quiet, withdrawn and gradually unresponsive to any stimulation from the outside world. Finally, she was placed in an institution where she withdrew totally from the world around her.

One nurse was given the task of trying to help this desperately ill little girl. But, how to proceed? Coercion wouldn't work: that would increase the child's fear and push her further away. She could not ignore the child because the little girl already saw the world as uncaring and rejecting. All she could do, really, was be present, with good will and determined respect and patient love.

At first it didn't work. The child screamed at her at times, at other times ignored her totally, at other times accused her of deceit. The nurse persisted, day after day, week after week until the child came to see that she did care. ONe day, hesitantly, tentatively, she reached out and took the nurse's hand. Eventually, a relationship emerged which led the child out of her isolation and back into a trusting rapport with the world.

The little girl was saved from the prison of fear and separation. She was set free from the bondage to self in which she was trapped. She was given the gift of new life. But she did not and could not do it by herself. She needed strength beyond herself. She needed someone with patient love to break through the vicious cycle of suffering, fear and withdrawal. That someone was the nurse. The child was saved by grace - ("unmerited love that reaches into our lives from beyond our own resources.") (From "Affirming the Grace of God," Wayne K. Clymer, The Protestant Hour , 6/14/70

That is what St. Paul is talking about in our text this morning. The "Amazing Grace" of God which we have seem in Jesus Christ and which we experience in the company of his people, the Church. In Christ God has done for us what that nurse did for the child. Paul struggles for the images powerful enough to express it: ("It may be", he observed, "that someone might dare to die for a good person. But God has shown us how much he loves us: it was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us.")

Well now, that assaults our logic. Putting it is the context of human relationships, we are sometimes made very uncomfortable when we receive an extravegant and undeserved gift. It may be more blessed to give, but under some circumstances it is far more difficult to receive. History of Rel. is a story of man's attempt to be reasonable w/ God - to strike a rational bargain. -that was the problem Jesus encountered w/ the religion of his day

The late Karl Barth put it this way: - i.e. a balanced sheet approach - goodness in return for love. But from the beginning - God's love has come first - OT lesson: God's Act first - as a response. - All the difference in the world!

"We dislike hearing that we are saved by grace. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." (Deliverance to the captives p 40)

Besides, we prefer to be logical, business-like about this matter. We're not at all comfortable with these claims of unconditional eternal love - nor with these demands for unconditional, total obedience. We'd like to negotiate. We'll take a little love, a little strength, a little comfort when we need it: and in return we'll be good, obey the rules and go to church on occasion. That's fair enough. That makes sense.

But it doesn't work. For the good news of the Gospel is that God really does love us totally, whether we're good or not good, whether we go to Church or play golf on Sunday morning, whether we're liberal or conservative, rich or poor. The Good news is that God's Grace is amazing; that it will not be reduced by our need to be reasonable and logical.

If you were the guardian of the little girl in the story, you would have regarded her healing as an event worth celebrating. You would not be casual about it: you would know that you could never repay the nurse - but you would be eternally grateful to her: you would love her: she would be special to you, as long as you lived. So Paul tries to get it down in words that strain with emotion: "we rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

through whom we have now received our reconciliation."

Sometimes life takes a turn that simply defies our need to be resonable . Sometimes things happen about which we can find nothing to say. If you have witnessed human birth you have experienced something which will not be described in terms of biology alone. If you have witnessed human death, you know that there is nothing logically sound which comes to mind to say on the occasion. There are times in life when even the most sophisticated among us can do nothing but give vent to the reality we are experiencing: and so we weep, or embrace - or laugh the laugh of indescribable happiness.

If you are loved that you know there is nothing rational about it ..

So it is with the Gospel. In Jesus Christ, we dare to believe, God has loved us, made us free, given us new life, and the wildly happy gift of eternal salvation. In Jesus Christ, we dare to believe, God has not simply inserted a new proposition into the academic arena, but has come to be among us as savior and friend and father.

What a good thing to reclaim that: and embrace it and interupt our frantic need to be reasonable just long enough to laugh the laugh of a prisoner set free or to weep the tears of a crippled man who can walk, or to sing those most unreasonable lyrics.

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound. . .

Amen

Father, we depend on you to give us faith. Help us, in the midst of our need to be reasonable, to hear the good news, to believe the promise, and to live lives of happy gratitude, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen